

6: Nara

I wake at about seven o'clock this morning to discover that it is pouring rain – not a good day for hitch-hiking! I have my breakfast half an hour later with three Japanese girls. At last I am eating what looks and tastes like traditional food: delicious salmon with rice, some pickled vegetables, seaweed, soup and tea.

Afterwards I wash my teeth (I notice that the Japanese have a peculiar habit of cleaning their teeth *before* breakfast), pack all my things carefully into plastic bags, don my raincoat and sou'wester and go out into the rain. After I have tried to thumb a lift for about three minutes and watched the traffic go whizzing by, I decide to give this up as a bad job – I will only get soaking wet and then nobody will be willing to offer me a lift.

I put away my 'Nara' sign, cross the road and walk to the station, where I enquire about travelling to Nara. I make it clear to the young lady that I need to travel cheaply and so she goes to a great deal of trouble to get information for me. In the end I realize that I must choose a more expensive option, for I will arrive at my destination too late in the evening on account of changing trains so often. The price comes to ¥11,000 (£44); as this includes a portion of the journey on the *Shinkansen*, the bullet train, it seems reasonable.

Off I go and catch the 9.40 train to Ofuna with just a minute to spare. The journey is uneventful: we pass through a very built-up area, stopping at various stations. As usual, the Japanese people on the train – who all look very dry, despite the rain – sleep for most of the journey. I have already noticed this tendency. They are either exhausted from working too hard or it is a convenient way of avoiding the awkwardness associated with starting a conversation with other people, thanks to the hierarchical nature of their language. If they have studied English or any other European language, it is so much easier for them to speak to a *gaijin* from the West.

At Ofuna I change for Odawara. This is another uneventful journey through more built-up areas, though here and there a little bit of greenery appears. At Odawara I have a short wait before boarding the bullet train – a new experience for me. First of all I have to study my ticket to discover which carriage I am in and which door I need to use. I then walk along the platform, where I see markings for the carriages and doors. I join a short queue at the appropriate point; at the scheduled time, just before 11 a.m., the train pulls in, *and stops dead on its marks*. I am absolutely dumbfounded. The door slides open automatically and we step inside – it is like boarding an aeroplane. The seats are plush and the carriage looks spotlessly clean. I sit by a window and, when the train moves off and gathers speed, the scenery outside – some of it quite breathtaking – slips by so fast that I can only catch a glimpse of it. We pass high mountains, many of them shrouded in mist, but unfortunately there is no sign of *Fujisan*, Mount Fuji. We zoom in and out of countless tunnels. In front of me, on the wall, is an electronic speedometer, which often indicates that we are travelling at about 300 km (186 miles) per hour.

As the journey is so comfortable and uneventful, it soon becomes boring. I take out my phrase book and pass the time by studying a little more Japanese. The majority of passengers in this carriage are smartly-dressed businessmen, most of whom are asleep. At around midday, three of them make short work of cans of Heineken beer

and *ekiben* (wooden boxes, purchased in the stations or aboard the train, which contain a light lunch of traditional Japanese food). I have thought about buying one of these rather appetizing-looking lunch boxes, but decide to do without and eat later.

After Nagoya, the scenery, which for the past while has been industrial and rather uninteresting, improves again. We whizz past more mist-covered mountains, bright green fields, and numerous villages, many of which have traditional wooden houses, temples and cemeteries. However, we never fully escape from the factories, electricity plants and pylons.

My journey on the bullet train finishes in Kyoto, which we reach shortly after two o'clock. From the train, the city looks extremely ugly, especially in this murky light. However, it has stopped raining by now. In fact, it had begun to clear up not long after I left this morning, which was infuriating as I might have succeeded in getting a lift or two to my destination!

I now board the little local train that slowly and noisily makes its way to Nara, the first permanent capital of Japan, founded in AD 710. Modelled on the Chinese capital of the time, Cháng'ān (modern Xi'an), it still contains its original Chinese-style Buddhist monasteries of the great Tang dynasty. The train, filled with ordinary people and schoolchildren, travels through a pleasant rustic area.

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Nara

At last we arrive in Nara by 3.35 p.m. I go to the information office, where I ask for directions to the youth hostel. However, when the lady telephones to make a reservation for me, she discovers that it is full. She then tries another one, and when she eventually gets through on the telephone, she reserves a bed for me and gives me new directions. I thank her and find my way to a nearby bus stop, where I have to wait a long time for a number 20 bus. By now the sky has cleared, the sun is shining, and it is pleasantly cool and fresh.

A bus eventually appears and, after I have travelled just a short distance, I hop off. The hostel is just a short walk away. Although small, it looks neat and comfortable. I check in, but as the people speak little or no English, I find it hard to make myself understood. The bill, which I assume is for two nights, is very cheap: just ¥2,050 (about £8). I am given a sheet sleeping bag and a long list of rules and regulations – they seem to be quite strict here. I leave my sandals in a box at the entrance, don a pair of plastic sandals, and flip-flop my way up to a little dormitory that contains eight beds. This place is much more basic than the one in Kamakura – in fact, it simply looks more like a typical hostel!

When entering *o-tearai* (the honourable toilet), I have to put on another pair of sandals, also made of plastic. It is worth noting that toilets and baths are never together in the same room here – places for washing and defecating are kept well apart in Japan. Afterwards I go to the washroom to freshen myself up, then go outside for a walk. Ambling along a narrow street, I head towards the eastern hills. It seems to be a nice little town, though it is slightly busier than Kamakura. I peep through the open doorways of little wooden houses, where I can see comfortable rooms with *tatami* mats. I also stop to look at tiny shops and just generally drink in the atmosphere. One or two elderly women in kimonos shuffle past me, bowing as they greet me. It is wonderful to be here among the locals.

I walk for about an hour, return to the hostel and chat to an American girl who is, in fact, Japanese. I then go with two Swiss lads to *o-furo* (the bath), which turns out to

be much smaller and basic than the luxurious one in Kamakura. The water here is much cooler. Nevertheless, I feel very refreshed afterwards. I then go down to the dining room, where I discover that there is no dinner for me. I obviously have not made myself understood! The American-Japanese girl kindly translates for me, but I am told that there is no way that I can get dinner at this late stage. My only option now is to find a nearby restaurant, even though I am feeling quite exhausted after walking on an empty stomach.

I leave, have a look around and find what looks like a cheap restaurant. There are very real-looking plastic replicas of the dishes on show in the window, but there are no prices. Having no idea what they are, I study them for a while until a lady comes out. I point to one, request it and ask, '*Ikura desu ka?*' ('How much is it?'). '*Sambyaku-en,*' the lady answers: ¥300 (£1.20). I think that I can rise to that – no doubt it is cheaper than the hostel meal!

Smiling and treating me with great courtesy, the lady conducts me into the little restaurant. The place is rather curious: it looks more like a barber's shop, but it is cosy. An elderly, weedy little man with watery eyes that are almost invisible, dressed only in trousers and a vest, struggles to his feet and with slow, weary movements, prepares my dish. In the meantime I survey the premises and its spartan décor. Everything is very basic; I sit at a simple wooden table.

My meal soon arrives: a large bowl containing noodles, vegetables and a small amount of meat, all swimming in a hot, spicy soup. It is quite tasty and filling; I wash it down with a glass of cold water. It takes me some time to eat (and drink) it all. While I do so, the old man sits before me either looking into space or at me – I cannot determine which – then, at times, at his newspaper. I finally finish, relax, pay, thank the old fellow, excuse myself and leave.

Back at the hostel I chat to the American-Japanese girl, write up some of this diary and, after everyone else in the room has done so, I go to bed.

This morning I wake at a little before seven o'clock to the sound of heavy rain. Not again! Half an hour later I go downstairs for breakfast: a tasty and filling meal of rice, fish, vegetables, soup and tea. Fed and happy, I prepare to go out, but as the rain is still bucketing down and nobody is venturing out, I sit down and write some more of yesterday's diary entry.



Deer, Nara Park

Finally, when people start to leave, I make a move and, seeing one of the lads borrowing an umbrella, I do the same. Just as I go outside, the rain stops, though the sky remains cloudy and grey. I walk down one of the busy main streets towards the city centre, turn left and head for Nara Park. Just inside it, I encounter several tame

sika deer, who bravely wander towards me. These are believed to be protectors of the city and country, and the divine messengers of the Kasuga Shrine, which I am planning to visit later. The first and nearest temple is the Kōfukuji, founded in AD 669 but burnt and rebuilt at different periods. The headquarters of the Hossō sect of Buddhism, it is regarded as being one of the seven great Buddhist temples in Nara.

Finding the various buildings associated with the temple proves to be quite difficult as my map is very inaccurate – like most Japanese maps! The first building that I find is the Nanendō, though at first I think it is the three-storeyed pagoda because of a confusing sign nearby. This Nanendō, an octagonal hall built in 1789, is quite impressive. At a little shrine beside it, two women are praying before an altar, beating drums and a gong. Once again I inhale the heady perfume of the incense. It is marvellous to see these places being used rather than serving as museums to past glories.

Taking my time, I read some information about the place that I have written in one of my two tiny notebooks, look around and wallow in the exotic atmosphere. It is not particularly peaceful here on account of noisy traffic nearby, but there are very few people around.



Pagoda, Kōfukuji, Nara

I then wander off and find the impressive five-storeyed pagoda, an impressive landmark. Built in AD 730, burnt five times and re-erected in 1426, it is the second highest pagoda in the country. Viewed in this morning's gloomy light, it looks rather grim, despite its elegance. Built mostly of timber, it is dark in colour and very solid in its construction. Beside it stands another elegant building, the Tōkondō, which I stop to admire.

I then walk a short distance to the Kokuhokan museum or Hall of National Treasures, which contains all the sculpture normally housed in the various temples. Although a little expensive at ¥400, I buy a ticket because I know that this is an important collection. I am delighted to find a map of the temple at the back of the little brochure that I am given, which contains detailed information on the exhibits.

The museum, although small, is impressive and contains many fine works of art. Naturally, all the exhibits are Buddhist statues of various deities, including benign

Buddhas seated in the lotus position and fierce-looking temple guardians. I take my time and amble around.

Outside again, I find my way to the rest of the buildings: the ugly main hall (recently built), the elegant Hokuendō or North Octagonal Hall (built in 721 and rebuilt in 1240), the Nanendō again, where I find a man praying before the sanctuary (perhaps he is a pilgrim) and finally the lovely little three-storeyed pagoda of 1143, which looks very graceful and well proportioned. I stop to admire it, stand somewhat precariously on a stone to take a carefully composed photograph, and carry on. What a pity that it is so dull this morning!

Pausing by the Sarusawa Pond, I rest, get my bearings and make for the nearby Kasuga Taisha Shinto shrine, founded in 768 and formerly rebuilt every twenty years to the original plan. This idea of rebuilding fascinates me. In the West, careful conservation helps to keep old buildings in as good condition as possible, and every precaution is taken to preserve the original structure. Here, in Japan, things can be quite different. When a decision is made to rebuild a temple or shrine, it is measured very carefully, plans are drawn and the whole structure is taken down. The building is then remade exactly to the plans, down to the tiniest detail, and erected with great care, then decorated in the same manner as the original. The plans are then put into safe keeping for the next rebuild.



Kasuga Taisha Shinto shrine, Nara Park

Having seen pictures of this beautiful shrine, the main Shinto shrine in the city, I am interested to see it for real. I walk under a large red *torii* and continue along a wide avenue. This eventually narrows, then splits into two. I take the right-hand path, which is lined with hundreds of stone lanterns. In all, there are 3,000 of these; every year they are lit between 3 February and 15 August. After the lanterns come flights of stone steps. At last I reach the top, where I see the bright vermillion pillars of the famous shrine. Although quite a breathtaking sight, it is smaller than I have imagined. Groups of Japanese children come along, but I manage to avoid them. I stop to take a photo of the stunning gateway, then enter the shrine.

While I am getting my bearings, I suddenly become aware that a Shinto ceremony is in progress in a nearby hall. I wander over and stop to gaze at the unfamiliar and fascinating rituals. A group of people, mostly women and all clothed in pure white, bow and clap their hands alternatively, following the actions of a priest who is almost hidden from view, and who chants in a low voice in front of an altar. A young girl,

dressed in a white blouse and a red skirt, and with jewels hanging over her forehead, then rises to her feet and performs a strange, slow-moving dance to the accompaniment of a eerie song accompanied by a flute and rhythmical hand-clapping. It sounds so unearthly that I feel I have been somehow transported to another planet. To Western ears, the music is blatantly discordant but very atmospheric; although Japan was highly influenced for a relatively short period of its history by Chinese culture, this very ancient religion and its music have developed in isolation over many centuries.

For me, it is marvellous to eavesdrop on a ceremony like this; an unexpected incident like this is what makes the experience of being in Japan so fascinating. Groups of tourists, worshippers and schoolchildren quietly come and go, disturbing nobody. Overall, the atmosphere is delightfully peaceful. Officials and priests at nearby stalls sell souvenirs and various artefacts that purport to tell people's fortunes. As usual in these shrines and temples, one feels close to nature, for everything is made of sweet-smelling timber and all around can be heard the sounds of birds and insects in the trees. By now I am quite familiar with the constant sound of the cicadas, the hissing of the mysterious insect, and the strange cry of the unidentified bird.



Kasuga Wakamiya shrine, Nara

I stay here for a while, soaking up the magical atmosphere, and then walk to the Kasuga Wakamiya shrine, a much smaller and more intimate affair that was last rebuilt in 1863. Here I discover what look like large, flat wooden spoons with messages written on them. Most of them are in Japanese, of course, but I find some written in English and other European languages. I think about writing on one, but what will I write? In the end, I give up the idea.

After looking around and taking some photographs, I head southwards, emerge from the park and go in search of the Shin-Yakushiji temple. This, I discover, is situated in the suburbs, where it is reasonably quiet and peaceful. Now and again the silence is broken by voices from loudspeakers; I presume that an election campaign is in progress, as cars are being driven around. I even see a small light aircraft being towed through the streets.

The Shin-Yakushiji turns out to be a very small, unpretentious Buddhist temple. I follow some ladies through a gateway and suddenly find myself at the sweetest little

restaurant imaginable. Situated within the temple grounds, it is thoroughly traditional in concept, and one side is open to a tiny, intimate garden. On the floor are *tatami* mats, on which some women are sitting at low tables. As it looks so tempting and as I am hungry by now, I decide to eat here. I study the menus pinned to the outer wall and try to make them out; most of them have the prices written in Japanese numbers, but one, the cheapest, is written in Arabic numerals: ¥450. Slowly, I manage to decipher the *hiragana* symbols: そうれん (*so-o-re-n*), 'sōren'. When I hear a couple of ladies asking for this dish and prefixing the word with the honorific 'o-', I know what I need to say. I approach the little window of the office, saying, 'O-sōren o kudasai' ('Sōren, please') and give the lady a ¥10,000 note as I have nothing smaller. As she does not have enough change, she goes away and returns with it shortly. Then, having watched what the ladies have done, I sit on the veranda, remove my sandals (outdoor footwear is never allowed indoors in the East), step into the simple yet elegant room and sit at a low wooden table on a length of carpet, Japanese-style, on my haunches. This is the real thing!

While I wait for my meal (I'm not entirely sure what it will be – probably noodles), I have time to take in my surroundings. This is my first experience of being in a traditional Japanese room. The décor is very simple, almost stark, with a certain Scandinavian feel about it – lots of straight lines and pale, muted colours (brown, yellow and white). The wood-and-paper screens that serve as windows have been slid back to reveal the charming, yet simple garden beyond; the doors can also be slid open and shut. The whole structure looks quite fragile, but this is its saving grace in a country of frequent earthquakes. Tall modern concrete buildings regularly collapse in strong earthquakes, but the humble one-storeyed Japanese wooden houses, which flex and bend with the quakes, generally stay in one piece.

The traditional *tatami* mats, used as flooring, are made of rice and rush straw. The mats come in standard sizes and determine the overall size of the room. Japanese rooms do not have specific purposes (such as a dining room, bedroom and so forth); they are areas that you can put to one use or another. With little or no furniture as such, you can instantly change your living room into a bedroom by taking a *futon* from a cupboard, unfolding it and spreading it on the floor.

As pictures are not hung on walls, rooms are equipped with an alcove known as a *tokonoma*, where a picture – or more likely a scroll with calligraphy – is hung, together with a simple arrangement of flowers or blossom (when in bloom) in a vase. Simplicity and elegance are very highly prized here. Flower arranging is done with great care and thought; not only is attention paid to the length and positioning of the individual branches, but also on *ma*, the space in between them – a concept almost unknown in the West. Calligraphy follows the Chinese pattern, written from top to bottom; it may consist of a short poem or a wise saying. Pictures, also Chinese in style, use a mixture of linear and atmospheric perspective, meaning that nearby objects are at the bottom of the composition, painted in strong colours, whereas distant objects, such as mountains, are placed higher up and are usually depicted in pale, washed-out colours, suggesting mist. Many pictures are simple compositions executed in black ink. An honoured guest is placed so that he or she is facing away from the *tokonoma*, so that he or she is framed by it. I notice that this little restaurant has a modest *tokonoma* in a corner, which contains a scroll bearing some elegant calligraphy.

My lunch eventually arrives: a tray containing a wooden box of noodles (two helpings of white and one of green in the middle, separated by some thick leaves), a little bowl of sauce, a tiny plate of condiments to put into the sauce, and a bowl of

green tea. As everything is so artistically arranged, it almost seems a shame to upset the composition by eating the meal! Observing what the ladies in front of me are doing, I tackle this unfamiliar food with a pair of simple wooden chopsticks. Although the noodles are cold, they are quite tasty. I am delighted that I am sampling a Japanese delicacy; although the meal is very simple – no doubt it is one of the vegetarian dishes eaten by the monks – it is filling and gives me a welcome lift. It is also extremely refreshing to rest in such a peaceful and beautiful setting after so much walking in this tiring, heavy weather. While I have been here, it has been raining a little, but by now it has eased off and I can hear just a few drops falling on the roof. Although I am indoors, the proximity of the little garden makes me feel as though I am almost outdoors.

I finally rise at 1.30 p.m., use *o-tearai* (honourable toilet, where I have to don a pair of clumsy wooden sandals), wash my hands and leave. As it costs ¥300 to visit the temple and as it is so small, I decide to skip it and return to the park. On the way I buy what I assume is an apple, though it tastes more like a pear.

Back in the park I return to the pleasing sounds of nature as I amble along the wooded paths, passing several tiny Shinto shrines, all painted vermilion, and arrive back at the Kasuga shrine, which by now is deserted. Wallowing in its magical atmosphere, I poke around every nook and cranny, probably looking into buildings that are out of bounds. I notice a priest in colourful robes showing a smartly-dressed man around. I investigate the nearby modern treasure house, but because of the price of admission, I do not bother to visit it. My impression is that this part of the complex, which is so close to the souvenir shops and coach parking area, is very touristy.



Sangatsudō, Nara Park

Taking another path, which passes more gaudy tourist shops, I make my way to the Tamukeyama Hachiman shrine, which, despite its rather impressive name, is something of an anti-climax. I just pass through it and make my way to the next place of interest: the Sangatsudō (March Hall, built in AD 733). Although not particularly impressive outside, it houses some of the most beautiful statues in Japan. I pay ¥200 to enter the dimly-lit interior, where I sit on *tatami* mats and examine the wonderful statues. A crowd of schoolchildren come in and make a fair amount of noise, but leave shortly afterwards. Although they are charming, they can be a bit of a nuisance, especially when they catch sight of me and shout ‘*harō!*’

Next comes the Nigatsudō (February Hall), a tall wooden Buddhist temple that was originally built in 752 and rebuilt in 1669. It sits on the top of a hill, overlooking the city, which by now is almost shrouded in mist. Neither the temple nor the view is particularly good, and so I do not dally here. I just snap a couple of photos, linger briefly on the veranda and descend the picturesque covered stairway.



Tōdaiji, Nara Park

I now find my way to the chief attraction here and, undoubtedly, the most important Buddhist temple of Japan: the Tōdaiji (Great East Temple), headquarters of the Kegon sect, which was founded in AD 745 and restored in 1708. On the way I pass its impressive bell tower, which I stop to admire and photograph. I finally enter the temple precincts and gaze at the Daibutsuden (Great Buddha hall) through its gateway. This elegant building, the largest wooden structure in the world, quite takes my breath away. I am glad that I have saved this until last. Despite the time – it is late afternoon by now – people are still pouring in and large groups of students are being marched inside and hollered at through loudhailers. I pay ¥300 for a ticket and walk towards the hall. Like the other tourists, I take out my camera and begin snapping pictures. Here it is at last: the great temple hall that I have read about and have longed to see.

Approaching the entrance, I inhale the heady aroma of incense, and step into the dark, mysterious interior. Here, in front of me, sitting serenely in meditation, is the huge black Daibutsu or Great Buddha, the Dainichi-Nyorai (Great Sun Buddha) of the esoteric Shingon sect. Slowly my eyes adjust to the darkness and I stand in awe gazing at this mighty 49-foot high statue. It is quite amazing to think that this sublime figure was made as long ago as AD 749, when the then Emperor had this colossal statue made to ward off a smallpox epidemic. I stand rooted to the spot, ignoring the noisy schoolchildren and their teachers bellowing at them. They finally leave and I have the place almost to myself. Despite all the noise and confusion, a colourfully robed monk with a shaven head has been sitting in front of the great statue on a cushion, chanting in a low voice and beating a gong.

Once I have gazed at the Buddha to my fill, I walk around the massive interior of the temple, stopping to view the other statues and exhibits. Everything here is on a large scale and is very impressive. There is great excitement about a square opening at the bottom of a wooden pillar; some people attempt to crawl through it, but only a small child succeeds in doing so.

Finally, after I have lingered long enough – it is becoming darker in here – I take one last look around and leave. I head back to the hostel, passing the famous Shōso-in, but find it closed. Never mind – I will try again tomorrow!

Tired but happy, I trudge back along the familiar roads to the hostel, where I have a long, relaxing bath and then sit down to a good supper. The food here is excellent. During the meal I chat to a Japanese girl and boy. Both of them are very shy about speaking English, but they manage very well. Afterwards I write my diary in the dormitory as it is too noisy downstairs, but I do not succeed in finishing it by bedtime.